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**Spaces of Dissociation:
The impact of childhood sexual abuse on the personal geographies of adult survivors**

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Spaces of Dissociation: The impacts of childhood sexual abuse on the personal geographies of adult survivors

Abstract

The experiences of survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) have received almost no attention in geography. However, activists and therapists working with survivors have long recognized that CSA has spatial impacts and that finding some sense of control over one's environment is an important step in recovering from this trauma. By bringing the stories of three adult women who are survivors of CSA into conversation with debates in human geography about the habitation of space and place, this psycho-social paper goes some small way towards addressing this oversight. Set in the context of the high prevalence of CSA in all communities, we argue that efforts to understand everyday, domestic and marginalized geographies need to consider the potential impact of abuse. By understanding psycho-social pathways by which abuse impacts on individuals we highlight how violence and trauma can impact on personal geographies in a myriad of ways.

Survivor voices and resilience

Judith Herman (2001), who continues to be one of the most influential writers on child sexual abuse (CSA), has argued that it is not just individuals but entire societies that can deny, disassociate, look the other way in relation to childhood sexual abuse.ⁱ The academic subject of geography is not immune to participating in this collective denial, as we have argued in a review of the literature (Willis, Canavan and Prior, 2015). This denial is partially enabled by individual

and collective silencing on the topic of CSA. Given that prevalence estimates indicate upwards of 1 in 7 females and 1 in 25 males have been sexually abused as children (Pinheiro 2006), we suggest that it is time for geographers to pay attention to the impact of abuse on survivors, in particular in relation to their personal geographies.

Even areas such as the geographical study of violence against women have largely steered clear of CSA. For example, while the data in Pain's (1995) ground-breaking survey of women and fear indicated that more of her participants had experienced violence before the age of 16 than after, the focus of her analysis remained on violence against adult women. Likewise more recent work on violence within the home both in the Global North (Warrington, 2001; Bowstead, 2015; Pain 2014a) and the Global South (Brickell, 2015) has continued to focus on violence against adult women, as have feminist interrogations of domestic violence in intimacy-geopolitics (Pain and Staeheli, 2014).

The one exception to the neglect of CSA in geography is Julia Cream's (1993) in-depth feminist analysis of the Cleveland controversy of the late 1980s. While CSA is much more widely recognised now than it was twenty-five years ago, and more survivors are speaking out today, Cream's analysis of the structures of power at work in society that enable CSA to happen and perpetrators to go unpunished remains relevant today.

That CSA might play a role in shaping geographies of exclusion has been acknowledged recently by geographers studying spatially marginalised groups. These scholars have drawn on work in other disciplines to note that people who are incarcerated (Schliehe, 2013) or homeless (Klodawsky, 2009) are more likely to be survivors than people in the general population. However, they have not yet explored the pathways by which CSA impacts on these marginalised geographies.

While there is compelling work on the cross-scalar relationships between domestic violence and global terrorism (Pain, 2014b), we have chosen in this paper to take a different but complementary approach to this structural one. Here, we interrogate the links between CSA experiences and adult survivor geographies through examining psycho-social dimensions of space, aligning ourselves with others who have called for more of this kind of research (Mansson McGinty 2014, Davidson 2000). We offer a detailed exploration of the impacts of a particular source of traumatization on the survivors of everyday violence. In this way we hope to break the silence on CSA in geography while opening up understandings of how the impacts of everyday violence are enacted in society in geographically relevant ways.

Although geographers have paid little attention to CSA, the spatial nature of the experience and its impacts has received some attention outside the discipline. It is well recognized that children subjected to sexual abuse may learn to mentally separate themselves spatially and temporally as a means of protection, a phenomenon referred to as dissociation (Herman 2001). This spatial and temporal separation can endure into adulthood (Hawkins 2007) and survivors can find themselves “disoriented spatially and temporally, [with] other places and people [being] projected onto the places and people present” (Burstow 2003, 1303).

For a group of people who have been silenced as part of their traumatization,, it is crucial to give primacy to survivor voices. Here we strive to avoid writing “expertly” and *about* them, which would constitute another act of silencing and violence (Bakhtin, 1984). Instead, we aim to *think with* (Willis, 2011) three survivor stories, presented in their own words, in order to better illuminate the impact of CSA on personal geographies. Attending diligently to the voices of survivors in both editing these anecdotes and reflecting on them, we let survivors break the silence, focusing as much on their courage as on their fears (Koskela 1997), and on their resistance and resilience alongside discourses and practices of dominance (De Leeuw 2007)

Methods

The stories included here are taken from a study conducted for an agency that counsels survivors of CSA in Scotland (Canavan and Prior 2012). The study focused on the impacts of CSA, and subsequent counselling, on parenting. It was not originally conceived as a geographical study. While the community-based agency serves both genders, only women volunteered to participate in the research. Five individual, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with these women as well as a focus group, which included some interviewed women alongside a couple of others. All participants had to have completed at least six sessions of counselling, and to be in continued contact with the agency through ongoing counselling, groups or volunteering. Where relevant, participants' counsellors were informed that they were engaging in the research and agreed to provide support if needed. The interviews and focus group took place at the agency and staff were on call should they be needed. Detailed care was taken to ensure that participant anonymity and confidentiality were protected and participants were informed of the limits of that confidentiality, related to child protection or risk of suicide.

The interviews were taped and transcribed. Using a modified version of voice-centred analysis (Doucet and Mauthner 2006), which was originally developed by feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan (Hamer,) to foreground relational aspects of the self and its embedding in broader social and cultural contexts. The transcripts were read for the "I" voice, the "you" voice, for relationships, and for context. This approach enabled us to take a personal-as-political approach to examining the psycho-social links between CSA and survivor geographies.

Through this process, the centrality of space and place to these women's experiences emerged. Key narrative segments were identified, bringing overall themes from interviews into specific relationship with aspects of space, place and mobility. The three authors of this paper worked together on these excerpts, drawing on our respective backgrounds in counselling, psychotherapy and human geography. We worked collaboratively and reflexively along similar

lines to that outlined in Willis et al. (2008), which enabled us to make collective, reflexive use of our experience and knowledge while maintaining a commitment to witnessing and dialoguing with the stories of the participants.

The Women's Stories

All five interviewees had evolved coping strategies based in their CSA experiences with strong spatial implications. For the sake of length, we present only three of the stories below. The women have adopted pseudonyms and the texts have been anonymised. These segments were selected for their diverse and contrasting accounts of personal use of space, the spatial dimensions of intimate relationships, home and family life and the occupation of, migration through and residence in wider communities. They also offer examples of ways in which the women manage spatial aspects of parenting and the potential for intergenerational impacts of CSA. Each account begins with a verbatim transcript, followed by a short reflection written by us, thickening the women's description of spatial aspects of their strategies. The extracts are presented in poetic form. This form of transcription follows the natural rhythms of speech (Kendall and Murray 2005), with the intention of making it more immediate and accessible to the reader (see Willis et al. 2014 for further discussion of poetic transcription). The women's stories and our reflections are brought into dialogue with themes within human geography in the final section.

Alison's story

I can see my daughter
now
starting to move out and enjoy things
that I was cut off as a teen

but essentially

I'm happy that that's the case,

that I can see it as well,

it makes me feel a wee bit sad

that I would have been

shutting myself away,

I don't know why no one really noticed

how insular some of the things that I did were

but it's made me determined

not to take my eyes off my child

I suppose

within my family,

I was the quiet one,

so I was predisposed

to maybe go unnoticed

But I'm determined

not to let that happen to them

where if they're going through something

I've got absolutely no idea

of where they're at, you know.

Cos, it came

to a crescendo with me

and I became really ill.

I mean,

I've never self-harmed or anything like that

But I would sit in a cupboard

just on my own

staying in for hours,

I'd be quite happy

just to sit on my own

in a small dark place.

Alison's spatial strategies, both for herself as a child and now as a parent, center around managing the visibility of the body and its emotional registers. She employs dichotomies of visibility and invisibility, being seen and not seen and the ambivalence of the gaze - being observed and not observed - both in her domestic space as a child and in the social world she observes and inhabits specifically with her daughter. Alison's 'seeing' of her daughter is set alongside her own invisibility as a child. The excerpt opens with Alison saying, 'I can see my daughter'; seeing someone who is visible in a physical sense and also meeting her emotionally and intersubjectively. Alison insists she was 'predisposed to go unnoticed' in her own childhood; however, what goes unsaid here is that she was noticed by the man who abused her. She was invisible to people who should have cared for her and visible to the man who harmed her.

Alison's sense of place in the cupboard is ambivalent: she felt safe there, protected and hidden from the abuse, but it was also a place where she went unnoticed by those who might have protected her. In her story, this visibility/invisibility led to a serious breakdown. She immediately plays down her illness, saying she didn't do anything serious like 'self harm'.

However, sitting in a cupboard could be understood as a particular sort of self harm, shutting (cutting) one's self off from others and from participation in the wider world.

Alison's account also highlights the ways in which the impacts of CSA may resonate intergenerationally. She moves between her experience as a young self and that of her daughter, highlighting the relationship between the self as experienced in childhood and the intersubjectivity of parental relationships, and drawing towards a re-evaluation of her experience. She compares the hidden place of her own self-protection in the cupboard with the experience of witnessing her daughter as she ventures into a wider world, watched-over by herself. Alison's story develops into one of agency represented by a determination for her daughter to be both visible and safe. She is joyful for her daughter and wistful for her younger self and absolutely determined not to let her childhood experiences impact upon her daughter's negotiation of a wider world. And yet the spatially-inflected strategies Alison has adopted for parenting emerge directly out of her experience of CSA and are, therefore, best explained by her status as a survivor. Through her efforts to keep her gaze on her daughter she is inevitably shaping her daughter's sense of space and use of place, demonstrating the intergenerational impact of CSA.

Laura's story

The controlling part for me
was like an OCD, it was a very personal thing,
it was about personal washing, about hygiene,
about controlling my environment,
in the sense of housework, housekeeping
but it was very personal.

They were allowed to make a mess,
I wasn't allowed to make a mess.

I didn't mind their play,
in fact, I encouraged messy play.

In fact, my youngest son came in one day just
I can't remember how old he was
but just absolutely drenched in mud,
just like a dripping Persil advert,
and he'd been playing in a new garden that was all top soil
with a hose
and he was just covered in mud.

I was happy for him to play,
he was never going to get to do it again
once it was planted,
then he was quite young,
but I didn't quite expect him to get as bad as that
and he just looked at me
and I just looked at him as if to say, what a mess
but I didn't say anything.
He goes, it's just happy dirt mum (LAUGHS)

I couldn't have portrayed that disgust of myself on to them
because they didn't feel that way.
They weren't like, "oh I can't touch that,"
"I've got to wash my hands".
I was quite happy with that.

It was very inward in my very self.

It was a very natural, natural way
because my happy memories of childhood
were with my grandparents,
being allowed to run free
without your shoes.

I struggled with myself,
you have to let them go out without shoes on
to run on the sand.
It's unfortunate if there's a piece of glass,
but you have to do it.

So I would be in a turmoil,
I would be going through the anxiety of,
there could be glass,
there could be this,
there could be that,
a broken can,
jelly fish.

In my head, I'd be thinking up scenarios
but to externally look at them and be waving them off along the sand.
But I was internalising it all,
struggling with it.
So I would say that's how that affected me.

The abuse is like inwardly,
but outwardly determined to remain.

The feeling of being contaminated is another common psychological consequence of CSA, one that is often understood by psychotherapy as an issue of imagery in a client's interior space (for example, Jung and Steil 2012). The impact that an image in internal space can have on external geographies, while largely ignored by psychotherapy, is demonstrated in Laura's story and in the strategies she has adopted to cope with her feelings of contamination and fears of being contaminating. Laura's quest for safe space involves attempting to control the boundaries of her own self and of her domestic environment, the house she shares with three boys and a husband. The metaphor of dirt permeates this extract and is enacted in Laura's everyday life. She is constantly vigilant in expelling that which does not belong in an attempt to re-create the space of her body and the space of her home as pure, something she was unable to do as a child.

Her son lays claim to a different type of dirt by declaring that he is covered in 'happy dirt'. By doing so, however, he acknowledges there is 'unhappy dirt' in his mother's life. This leads her to reflect that dirt in its rightful, 'natural' place can be happy dirt and on her memories of running barefoot on the beach. She wants these experiences for her children, but struggles with the knowledge that the environment cannot be controlled. Things may be out of place - glass, broken can, jellyfish - things that can cut or sting, penetrating the boundaries of the body. She must negotiate between leaving her children vulnerable to harm and being over-protective and restricting them and their access to space too much. She performs calmness while being inwardly anxious.

In the latter part of this extract Laura repeatedly uses the word 'determined', an active verb of a self-possessed subject. She experiences anxiety, disgust and a sense of being dirty on the inside, but is determined to prevent these internal experiences from impacting upon her

family. She feels compelled to keep a boundary around the bad things inside her. However, this preoccupation with patrolling boundaries is what leaks out, it is an internal metaphor enacted in the places she occupies with her family. Not only is her own geography impacted by the sexual abuse she experienced as a child, but so is that of her husband and three sons.

Jenny's story

There was that feeling of mismatching before,
Not really feeling quite right,
not understanding why.
I've always just felt as if it wasn't really me or –

And I think that's possibly a reason why I've,
I've moved around a lot,
I've moved jobs a lot,
I've never really settled anywhere
or in any job or –
I've moved relationships a lot

And now I'm,
I'm settled at home,
I'm settled with my family,
I'm settled with my job.
Everything just –
I just feel a lot more comfortable,

I think the abuse has made me more determined

to find that settled place.

And determined to –

I'm determined to stop letting it affect me.

It's affected me for too long,

and I'm not gonna let it affect my children.

Jenny's coping strategies are enacted on a wider scale than those of Laura and Alison. Her story illustrates how profoundly abuse in childhood can affect an adult's capacity to occupy and use space, as well as how spatial dimensions can figure in recovery from abuse. Jenny's story highlights the inter-relationship between subjectivity and space, and how disturbances in subjectivity, in particular the sense of not being oneself, can be reflected in a person's inability to sustain a sense of belonging to any place or network of relationships and can lead to migration across space. Her story then develops into one of restoration and recovery, presented through this inter-linking of subjectivity and space, firstly as disordered, and then as restored.

Jenny connects past feelings of not really being herself with 'always moving'. She offers four negative evaluation clauses in which the 'I' feels disconnected from the 'me', with the ideas of 'mismatching' and 'not right' conjuring images of misalignment. Jenny then connects this sense of not being herself to a continuous sense of pervasive displacement and unbelonging, characterised by always moving, never settling, in the three spheres of home, work and family.

With the phrase 'and now', Jenny begins her story of a present time when external experience of spatial habitation reflects an internal experience of self-determination. Where before she was always moving, she is now settled and she repeats the same three spheres of home, family and work. Her phrase 'that settled place' links the sense of subjective well-being, the settled place within the self, and her choice to physically ground herself in spatial and relational reality outside the self. The settled place offers an internal sense of security and belonging, a psychological accomplishment, and an interpersonal and geographical

accomplishment, as she commits to forming and maintaining an intimate partnership, founding a family, sticking with a job, a home and a community.

What do these stories have to say to human geography?

The three women whose voices are shared here are in a relatively privileged position compared to many survivors; they are employed, white women in their 30s, 40s and 50s living in the U.K. They all live in a family home with other family members, they are not incarcerated, homeless or missing. They have all been through counselling. In many respects they present elements of a best-case scenario. However, the past is clearly still present in the geographies of their present-day lives, from the intimate spaces of their own bodies through to broader geographies of mobility and 'choice' for themselves and their children. In psychotherapy this intrusion is referred to as the "presenting past" (Jacobs 2012). As discussed in the introduction, at its most intense this can result in dissociation from the current place and time (Herman 2001). Though these women can be understood partly as being lived by their past, they all seek to have some control over their personal life story and personal geographies.

Two overarching patterns emerge from our engagement with these stories. First, in their attempts to cope with experiences of CSA, all three women have made significant changes to their personal geographies, changes that persisted and evolved through adulthood. Second, the spatial strategies they adopted differed greatly. We can be fairly confident that a person's relationship to and strategies regarding space will be altered through experiences of CSA, but the exact nature and extent of those alterations will be as unique as the women, the circumstances of their traumatization and subsequent life stories..

As the excerpts demonstrate, one of the central ways survivors try to keep themselves and their children safe is through attempting to control space. Paying attention to how survivors enact such geographical strategies, and even supporting them in doing so, is sometimes explicitly advocated for those who work therapeutically with them (Herman 2001), although

others have pointed out that such control is never actually achievable (Burstow, 2003).

Survivors may try to control space through becoming a 'moving target', never physically staying in one place for too long like Jenny. They may try to control space through the constant monitoring of boundaries and purification of contained spaces, like Laura. They may try to control space through managing visibility across boundaries like Alison. Or they may choose to control space in a way not represented here.

Studies of women, violence and geography have focused on: the impact of fear on perceptions, experiences and uses of public space (Valentine 1989 and Pain 1991); the entrapment of women in domestic spaces through violence and fear (Warrington, 2001; Pain 2014a); and the impact of domestic violence and fear on migration by abused women (Bowstead, 2015). While this work is empirically rich and theoretically complex, and has occasionally explored a life history of victimisation (including CSA) as contributing to fear (Pain, 1995, Koskela, 1997), the three stories we have presented, indicate this work does not go far enough. The trauma of violence, particularly sexual violence in childhood, not only results in people feeling fear and altering their behaviour in, and habitation of certain places, in reaction to fear, it can structure *everything* about their personal geographies. Fear is only one of the many emotions that CSA engenders, and these emotions and their geographical and social justice implications need to be explored more broadly and more deeply in subsequent pieces of research

While we have made some connections with geographies of domestic abuse, of course children are not only abused in their own domestic spaces. Leaving homes or neighbourhoods to escape violence is not an option for children. They have to wait until they have grown up. For Jenny, once she was able to move away she had difficulty in settling down, even well after the threat from her abuser was no longer present. For Allison, problematic though it was, retreating to a cupboard was her way of controlling space and becoming safe from an extra-familial abuser. While related, the impacts of CSA on domesticity, internal and international

migration are likely different from those of adult domestic violence and require further study in their own right.

One of the most damaging impacts of CSA, particularly in its penetrative forms, is in denying children control over the boundaries of their most intimate geographies. It is all too common for survivors to feel as though they are contaminated, like Laura, leading them to strive continuously to cleanse and purify their bodies and their domestic environments. Geographers have recently taken an interest in dirt and cleanliness (Campkin and Cox 2007). Abjection and the desire to expel from a place that which is perceived as not belonging is not merely a product of human psychological development more generally or of social relations and cultural contexts but may be the result of concrete experiences (Wolkowitz 2007), such as the very personal and embodied experience of CSA.. The internal metaphor of feeling contaminated may be projected onto and enacted in external space, highlighting the importance of psycho-social-geographical approaches that move beyond extreme psychological outcomes and explore the role that past traumas have on shaping present geographies more generally.

Nor do these experiences only impact upon the survivors themselves. The high prevalence of CSA indicates that risks to children are very real, supporting Pain's (2006) conclusion that parental fears for their children's safety, and their attempts to control children's access to space, are in fact reasonable. We would add to Pain's observations that parents' perceptions of risks for their children, and resulting control of their children's access to space, will often be impacted by their *own* traumatic experiences of CSA and not necessarily in linear ways. As Laura's discussion of the beach demonstrates, the experience of CSA may lead parents to be overly anxious about seemingly unrelated dangers in places seemingly unrelated to their personal historical geographies of abuse. Further research is needed to explore the intergenerational transmission of trauma from a geographical perspective.

Finally, future research in this area is needed with men as well as with women. We tried unsuccessfully to recruit men to our own project. The difficulty in reaching male survivors is

endemic to CSA research, reflecting as it does the reluctance of men to both disclose and seek treatment for CSA (Holmes, Offen and Waller, 1997). In many ways men are more strongly impacted by emotions such as shame into remaining silent in relation to this issue (Etherington, 2000), again highlighting the importance of engaging in open discourse on the subject of CSA.

Because CSA has been almost completely ignored in the field of geography, the agenda for further research in this area is vast. In this last section we have only highlighted those areas of further research that have been directly touched upon by the three women whose stories sparked our own interest in the subject. This paper has not even touched on social, spatial, state or structural factors enabling CSA to continue in most societies at alarmingly high levels. Nevertheless, we hope that this paper has gone some way towards opening up a space for further dialogue on the geographies of CSA; a significant social justice issue the implications of which are lived on a daily basis by millions of survivors the world over.

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ⁱ Along with Judith Herman's classic text (2001), readers may wish to consult Paris Goodyear-Brown's (2012) *Handbook of Child Sexual Abuse* which focuses on psychological sequelae and treatment for individuals, and the edited collection of papers by Paula Reavey and Sam Warner (2013) which addresses social, cultural and political dimensions of CSA from a feminist, post-structuralist perspective.